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(72) Inventors:
• Haimovich, Yosef
Rishon le Zion 75258 (IL)
• Armoni, Yehuda
Reut 71908 (IL)
• Auerbach, Michael
Maccabim 71908 (IL)

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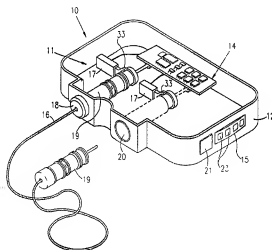
(74) Representative: Ungria Lopez, Javier et al
Avda. Ramon y Cajal, 78
28043 Madrid (ES)

(54) Self-locking seal

(57) An electronic seal (10) including a housing (12), alarm circuit (14) which when actuated provides an alarm signal, a wire (16) extending from the housing (12) and in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry (14), a locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively lockingly engages the wire (16) to the housing (12), and a switch (15) external to the housing (12) in electrical communication with the locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively unlocks the locking element (11, 40, 58) to release the wire (16). There is also provided an electronic seal (10) including a housing (12) including

alarm circuitry (14), the alarm circuitry (14) when actuated providing an alarm signal, a wire (16) extending from the housing (12) and in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry (14), the wire (16) being attached at a first point (18) and at a second point (20) thereof to the housing (12), a portion of the wire (16) between said first (18) and second (20) points, called a tying portion (22), being suitable for tying an object, wherein tampering with the tying portion (22) actuates the alarm circuitry (14), and an adjustment device (32) for adjusting a length of the tying portion (22).

FIG. 1



Description

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0001] The present invention relates to electronic seals generally, and particularly to a self-locking electronic seal.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] Electronic tags are known that can be attached to an object and monitored, sensed, or interrogated for purposes of preventing theft of or tampering with the object. For example, applicant/assignee's U.S. Patent Application No. 08/815,389, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference, describes a battery-operated electronic seal that, when tampered with, communicates via a transceiver to a detection system for providing an alarm signal or other indication, and thereby detect the tampering and/or removal of the seal from an object sealed or tagged therewith. One of the electronic seals described in U.S. Patent Application No. 08/815,389 employs resistive wires which when tampered with provide an indication of such tampering.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0003] The present invention seeks to provide improvements to the electronic seal described in U.S. Patent Application No. 08/815,389 which employs resistive wires. In the seal of the present invention, there is a locking element which selectively lockingly engages a wire, and the locking element can be unlocked only by means of an external switch.

[0004] There is thus provided in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention an electronic seal including a housing, alarm circuitry which when actuated provides an alarm signal, a wire extending from the housing and in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry, a locking element which selectively lockingly engages the wire to the housing, and a switch external to the housing in electrical communication with the locking element which selectively unlocks the locking element to release the wire.

[0005] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the switch is mounted on an external surface of the housing.

[0006] Further in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the switch includes a coded switch.

[0007] Still further in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the external switch includes a remote control device.

[0008] Additionally in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the external switch includes a computer terminal in wireless communication with the housing.

[0009] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of

the present invention the locking element includes a solenoid which selectively lockingly engages the wire.

[0010] Further in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the solenoid includes a tongue which selectively protrudes from the solenoid and fixedly clamps the wire.

[0011] Still further in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the wire is connected to an electrical jack and the solenoid includes a tongue which selectively protrudes from the solenoid and fixedly clamps the jack.

[0012] Additionally in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the wire is wound around a bobbin and the solenoid selectively fixedly clamps the bobbin, thereby also clamping the wire.

[0013] There is also provided in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention an electronic seal including a housing including alarm circuitry, the alarm circuitry when actuated providing an alarm signal, a wire extending from the housing and in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry, the wire being attached at a first point and at a second point thereof to the housing, a portion of the wire between the first and second points, called a tying portion, being suitable for tying an object, wherein tampering with the tying portion actuates the alarm circuitry, and an adjustment device for adjusting a length of the tying portion.

[0014] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the adjustment device includes a yoke for wrapping therearound the tying portion.

[0015] Further in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention an electrical element is disposed through the yoke, the electrical element being in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry, wherein a change in an electrical parameter of the electrical element is communicated to the alarm circuitry for actuation thereof.

[0016] Still further the adjustment device includes a tightening device to which the wire is attached, the tightening device permitting the wire to be drawn out of and to be pulled into the housing, and substantially fixing the wire at the second point thereof. Preferably the tightening device includes a locking element which selectively lockingly engages the wire.

[0017] Additionally in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the tightening device includes a bobbin around which the wire is wound and a locking element which selectively lockingly engages the bobbin.

[0018] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention a portion of the wire forms part of a Wheatstone bridge, in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry, for measuring changes in electrical resistance of the wire.

[0019] Additionally in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention the first point is attached to an electrical connector in electrical communication with the alarm circuitry.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0020] The present invention will be understood and appreciated more fully from the following detailed description, taken in conjunction with the drawings in which:

Fig. 1 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention with an external switch for unlocking a locking element which selectively lockingly engages a wire; Fig. 2 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with another preferred embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 3 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with yet another preferred embodiment of the present invention;

Fig. 4 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with still another preferred embodiment of the present invention and comprising a bobbin around which the wire is wound;

Fig. 5 is a simplified block diagram of illustration of the electronic seal of Fig. 1;

Fig. 6 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with another preferred embodiment of the present invention and comprising a yoke for wrapping therearound a wire; and

Fig. 7 is a simplified pictorial illustration of an electronic seal constructed and operative in accordance with yet another preferred embodiment of the present invention and comprising an extender yoke for wrapping therearound a wire.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

[0021] Reference is now made to Fig. 1 which illustrates an electronic seal 10 constructed and operative in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention.

[0022] Electronic seal 10 preferably includes a housing 12 including alarm circuitry 14, which when actuated provides an alarm signal. Alarm circuitry 14 is preferably constructed in accordance with the circuitry disclosed in U. S. Patent Application No. 08/815,389.

[0023] A wire 16 extends from housing 12 and is in electrical communication with alarm circuitry 14. Wire 16 is attached at a first point 18 and, optionally at a second point 20 thereof, to housing 12. In the illustrated embodiment, first and second points 18 and 20 are electrical sockets mounted on an external surface of housing 12. For convenience, a jack 19 may be attached to one end of wire 16 which fixedly mates with one of these

electrical sockets. Tampering with any portion of wire 16 actuates alarm circuitry 14. For example, as taught in U. S. Patent Application No. 08/815,389, wire 16 may be a frangible element, such as a shielded wire, which when broken provides an output indication of tampering with seal 10. Alternatively, wire 16 may comprise electrically resistive wire, and tampering with wire 16 causes a change in electrical resistance of the wire, which change is communicated to alarm circuitry 14 for actuation thereof.

[0024] Electronic seal 10 preferably includes a locking element 11 which selectively lockingly engages wire 16 to housing 12. In the embodiment of Fig. 1, locking element 11 comprises a solenoid 17 which selectively lockingly engages wire 16. Solenoid 17 preferably includes a tongue 33 (shown generally U-shaped, but may be any other arbitrary shape) which selectively protrudes from solenoid 17 and fixedly clamps jack 19. As shown in Fig. 1, two jacks 19 may be provided each of which is clamped by a corresponding solenoid 17. A switch 15, mounted externally on housing 12, and in electrical communication with locking element 11, selectively unlocks locking element 11 in order to release wire 16. Switch 15 preferably is a coded switch that includes a plurality of keys or buttons 23 for entering a code for unlocking locking element 11. A display 21 may be provided on housing 12 for displaying signals, characters, numeral or letters, for example, related to the code or upon which the code may be based.

[0025] Wire 16 is shown in Fig. 1 as being releasably attached at second point 20 to housing 12. Alternatively, wire 16 may be permanently attached at second point 20 to housing 12. It is also appreciated that circuitry 14 may alternatively be remotely located from electronic seal 10 and in communication therewith.

[0026] Referring additionally to Fig. 5, it is seen that instead of a solenoid, other actuation apparatus may be used, such as, but not limited to, an electric motor, piezoelectric crystal actuator, pneumatic actuator, hydraulic actuator, or spring-actuated actuator.

[0027] Reference is now made to Fig. 2 which illustrates electronic seal 10 actuated by a different kind of switch 27 in accordance with another preferred embodiment of the present invention. In this embodiment, the switch 27 may include a remote control device 29 in wireless communication with a transceiver 31 connected to circuitry 14 and solenoids 17. Transceiver 31 preferably not only receives a signal from remote control device 29, but also wirelessly transmits an alarm signal generated by alarm circuitry 14. Alternatively, the remote control device or switch 27 may include a computer terminal 41 and keyboard 43 in wireless communication via a transmitter 45 with transceiver 31. In order to enhance security, the communication may be encrypted. For example, well known encryption algorithms, such as RC-5, DES or DVB, may be employed. To provide an even greater level of trust, mutual zero-knowledge interaction authentication sessions between

the remote control device and seal 10 may be held, such as the so-called Flat-Shamir authentication methods taught in US Patent 4,748,888 to Shamir and Flat, the disclosure of which is incorporated herein by reference.

[0028] Reference is now made to Fig. 3 which illustrates an electronic seal 30 constructed and operative in accordance with yet another preferred embodiment of the present invention. Electronic seal 30 is preferably similar in construction to seal 10, with like elements being designated by like numerals. Electronic seal 30 differs from seal 10 in that seal 30 includes an adjustment device 32 which comprises a tightening device 34 to which wire 16 is attached. Tightening device 34 preferably includes a conduit 36 through which wire 16 can be drawn out of and pulled into housing 12 (in the directions generally indicated by arrows 38), and a locking element 40 which selectively lockingly engages wire 16 so as to substantially fix wire 16 at a second point 42 thereof. Locking element 40 is preferably in electrical communication with alarm circuitry 14 and comprises a solenoid 48 which clamps down on wire 16, for example. Locking element 40 is also preferably in electrical communication with wire 16, so that any attempt to disconnect or detach wire 16 from locking element 40 will be sensed by alarm circuitry 14. Thus, locking element 40 and wire 16 serve as an electronic lock. In this embodiment, wire 16 is preferably, but not necessarily, an unshielded resistive wire whose resistance can be measured from the outside, such as a conductive elastomer, e.g., an elastomeric RF gasket material.

[0029] In accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, a portion of wire 16 can be used to form part of a Wheatstone bridge 37, in electrical communication with alarm circuitry 14, for measuring changes in electrical resistance of wire 16.

[0030] Reference is now made to Fig. 4 which illustrates an electronic seal 50 constructed and operative in accordance with yet another preferred embodiment of the present invention. Electronic seal 50 is preferably similar in construction to seal 10, with like elements being designated by like numerals. Electronic seal 50 differs from seal 10 in that seal 50 includes an adjustment device 52 which comprises a tightening device 54 to which wire 16 is attached. Tightening device 54 preferably includes a bobbin 56 around which wire 16 is wound and a locking element 58, preferably a solenoid 61, which selectively lockingly engages bobbin 56. Bobbin 56 may include a gear, in which case solenoid 61 preferably includes a tongue 63 which engages the teeth of the gear so as to substantially fix wire 16 at a second point 59 thereof. It is appreciated that locking element 58 may be manually or automatically locked and unlocked, as well as by remote control. Preferably the angular position and/or rotation of bobbin 56 is measured by a measuring device 60, such as an encoder. The initial angular position of bobbin 56, i.e., after sealing the object with seal 50, is fed to the alarm circuitry 14. Any angular change in the position of bobbin 56 is then used

as a criterion for detection of tampering.

[0031] Further embodiments of the invention will now be described which are particularly useful as electronic seals for tying sacks and the like.

[0032] It is very common to close sacks, bags and the like by tying them with rope, cord, string, wire, etc., and then seal the tie with some type of inspector's seal which provides an indication of tampering with the seal. Such seals are generally mechanical in nature, such as the familiar lead seal lug on electrical meters, or quality assurance decals on the lids of electronic equipment.

[0033] However, electronic seals have not been used in the art for sealing sacks. Although one of the electronic seals described in U.S. Patent Application No. 08/615,389 employs resistive wires which when tampered with provide an indication of such tampering, nevertheless these wires are not readily applicable for providing a tampering indication when tied to a sack. One of the reasons is that the wires have a fixed length and after tying there is a portion of the wires which is inevitably left loose or dangling. If any portion of the wire is tampered with, dangling or not, an alarm will be sounded. However, in general, the alarm will be indicative of an actual attempt to break into the sack only if the part of the wire that is wrapped around and actually sealing the sack is tampered with. On the other hand, tampering with the dangling part is not necessarily indicative of an attempt to pilfer or tamper with the contents of the sack, and thus would constitute a false alarm.

[0034] Reference is now made to Fig. 6 which illustrates an electronic seal 10' constructed and operative in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the present invention, and which is particularly useful as a seal for tying and securing a sack and the like.

[0035] Electronic seal 10' is preferably similar in construction to seal 10, with like elements being designated by like numerals. In electronic seal 10', a tying portion 22 of wire 16 is defined between first and second points 18 and 20 which is suitable for tying an object, such as a sack or hasp, for example. Tampering with any portion of wire 16 actuates alarm circuitry 14, as described hereinabove.

[0036] In order not to have an unwanted dangling portion of wire 16 after tying the object, an adjustment device 24 is provided for adjusting a length of tying portion 22. In the embodiment of Fig. 6, adjustment device 24 comprises a yoke 26 for wrapping therearound tying portion 22. Typically a user ties an object with wire 16, jack 19 being the free end of wire 16 during tying, and wraps any extra wire around yoke 26. Thereafter, jack 19 is fixedly connected to housing 12 at first point 18, and seal 10 is ready for monitoring any tampering with the object. An electrical element 28, such as an electrically resistive element or a conductive wire, is disposed through yoke 26, electrical element 28 being in electrical communication with alarm circuitry 14. Tampering with yoke 26, or with the windings of wire 16 therearound, causes a change in electrical resistance, capacitance

or any other electrical parameter, of electrical element 28, which change is communicated to alarm circuitry 14 for actuation thereof.

[0037] Reference is now made to Fig. 7 which illustrates an alternative version of seal 10 wherein yoke 26 is replaced by an extender yoke 89. In this embodiment, first and second points 18 and 20 are electrical connectors mounted on an external surface of extender yoke 89. In this embodiment, electrical element 26 is routed through the entire inner structure of extender yoke 89. Except for the aforementioned differences, the embodiment of Fig. 7 operates identically to the embodiment of Fig. 6.

[0038] It is noted that the embodiments of Figs. 1 and 2, if provided with a sufficient length of wire 16 between first and second points 18 and 20, can be used to tie and secure sacks and the like, although these embodiments lack an adjustment device.

[0039] However, the embodiments of Figs. 3 and 4 can readily be used to tie and secure sacks and the like, wherein the adjustment device 32 and 52 are provided which comprise tightening devices 34 and 54, respectively, as described hereinabove.

[0040] It will be appreciated by persons skilled in the art that the present invention is not limited by what has been particularly shown and described hereinabove. Rather the scope of the present invention includes both combinations and subcombinations of the features described hereinabove as well as modifications and variations thereof which would occur to a person of skill in the art upon reading the foregoing description and which are not in the prior art.

Claims

1. An electronic seal (10) comprising:

a housing (12);
alarm circuitry (14) which when actuated provides an alarm signal; and
a wire (16) extending from said housing (12) and in electrical communication with said alarm circuitry (14);

characterized by a locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively lockingly engages said wire (16) to said housing (12); and

a switch (15, 27) external to said housing (12) in electrical communication with said locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively unlocks said locking element (11, 40, 58) to release said wire (16).

2. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said alarm circuitry (14) detects an open circuit in a circuit comprising said alarm circuitry (14) and at least one of said wire (16)

and said locking element (11, 40, 58).

3. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said switch (15, 27) is mounted on an external surface of said housing (12).

4. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 3, further characterized in that said switch (15) comprises a coded switch.

5. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said switch (27) comprises a remote control device (29).

6. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 5, further characterized in that said remote control device (29) communicates with said seal by means of encrypted communication.

7. The method according to claim 6, further characterized in that said encrypted communication comprises a mutual zero-knowledge interaction authentication session.

8. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 5, further characterized in that said remote control device (29) comprises a computer terminal (41) in wireless communication with said housing (12).

9. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said locking element (11, 40, 58) comprises a solenoid (17, 49, 61) which selectively lockingly engages said wire (16).

10. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 9, further characterized in that said solenoid (17) comprises a tongue (33) which selectively protrudes from said solenoid (17) and fixedly clamps said wire (16).

11. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 9, further characterized in that said wire (16) is connected to an electrical jack (19) and said solenoid (17) comprises a tongue (33) which selectively protrudes from said solenoid (17) and fixedly clamps said jack (19).

12. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 9, further characterized in that said wire (16) is wound around a bobbin (56) and said solenoid (61) selectively fixedly clamps said bobbin (56), thereby also clamping said wire (16).

13. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said locking element (11, 40, 58) is selected from the group consisting of an electric motor, a piezoelectric crystal actuator, a pneumatic actuator, a hydraulic actuator, and a spring-actuated actuator.

14. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 1, further characterized in that said wire (16) which extends from said housing (12) is attached at a first point (18) and at a second point (20) thereof to said housing (12), and a portion of said wire (16) between said first (18) and second (20) points, called a tying portion (22), is suitable for tying an object, wherein tampering with said wire (16) actuates said alarm circuitry (14), and the seal further comprises an adjustment device (32) for adjusting a length of said tying portion (22).
15. An electronic seal (10) comprising:
 a housing (12) comprising alarm circuitry (14), said alarm circuitry (14) when actuated providing an alarm signal;
 characterized by a wire (16) extending from said housing (12) and in electrical communication with said alarm circuitry (14), said wire (16) being attached at a first point (18) and at a second point (20) thereof to said housing (12), a portion of said wire (16) between said first (18) and second (20) points, called a tying portion (22), being suitable for tying an object, wherein tampering with said wire (16) actuates said alarm circuitry (14); and
 an adjustment device (32) for adjusting a length of said tying portion (22).
16. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 15, further characterized in that said adjustment device (32) comprises a yoke (26) for wrapping therearound said tying portion (22).
17. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 16, further characterized in that an electrical element (28) is disposed through said yoke (26), said electrical element (28) being in electrical communication with said alarm circuitry (14), wherein a change in an electrical parameter of said electrical element (28) is communicated to said alarm circuitry (14) for actuation thereof.
18. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 15, further characterized in that said adjustment device (32) comprises a tightening device (34) to which said wire (16) is attached, said tightening device (34) permitting said wire (16) to be drawn out of and to be pulled into said housing (12), and substantially fixing said wire (16) at said second point (20) thereof.
19. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 18, further characterized in that said tightening device (34) comprises a locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively lockingly engages said wire (16).
20. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 18, further characterized in that said tightening device (34) comprises a bobbin (56) around which said wire (16) is wound and a locking element (11, 40, 58) which selectively lockingly engages said bobbin (56).
21. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 18, and further comprising a measuring device (60) that measures a change in angular position of said bobbin (56), said measuring device (60) using said change to actuate said alarm circuitry (14).
22. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 15, further characterized in that a portion of said wire (16) forms part of a Wheatstone bridge (37) in electrical communication with said alarm circuitry (14) for measuring changes in electrical resistance of said wire (16).
23. The electronic seal (10) according to claim 15, further characterized in that said first point (18) is attached to an electrical connector (19) in electrical communication with said alarm circuitry (14).

FIG. 1

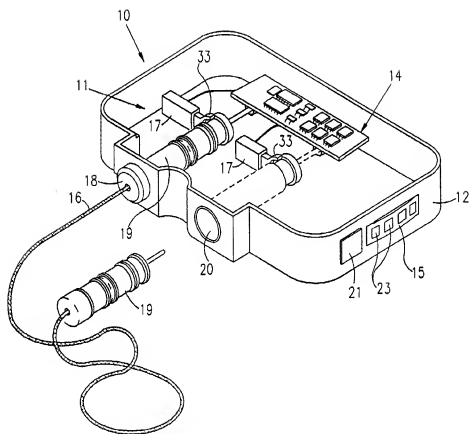


FIG. 2

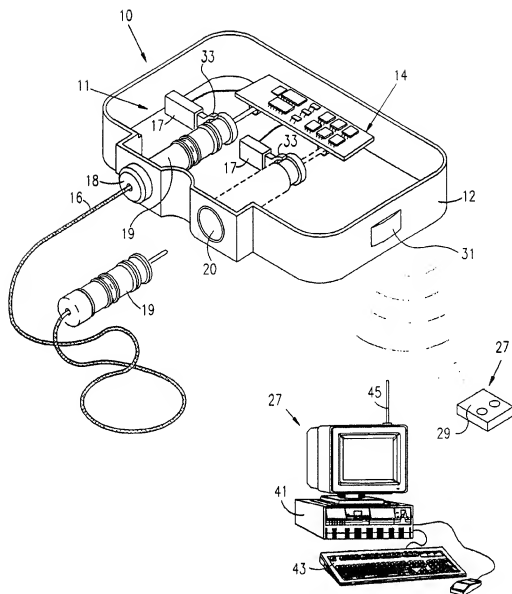


FIG. 3

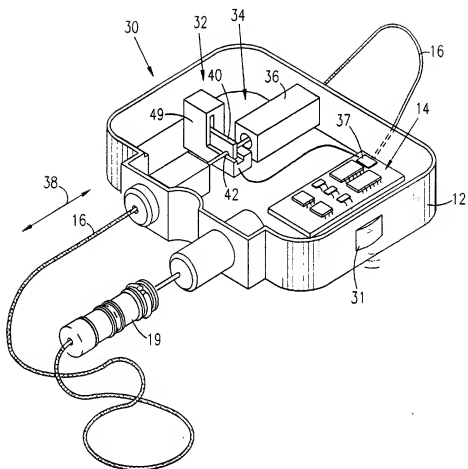


FIG. 4

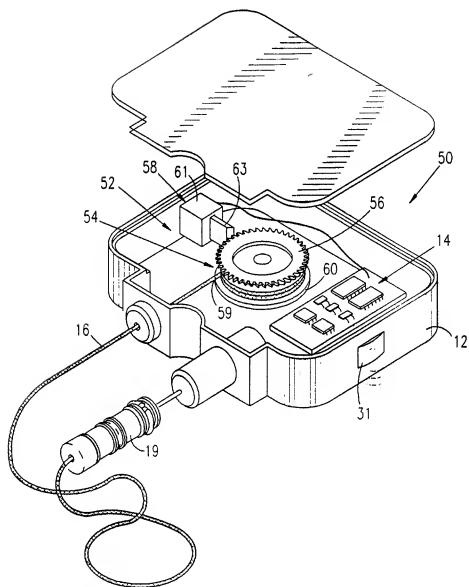


FIG. 5

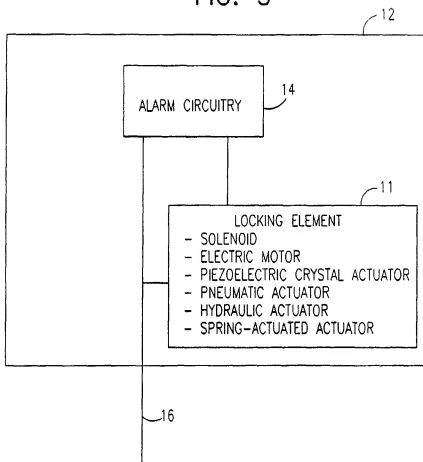


FIG. 6

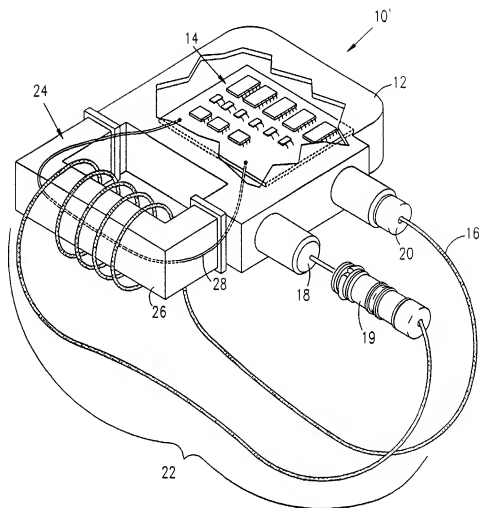


FIG. 7

